

PURSUIT of God, Pt. 1

DEUT. 6.4-9

This morning begins a series I've entitled "Rooted."

We have been working diligently to get the webpage up and running and have finally agreed on a design. The page is up, but is basically empty while we create information to fill in the blanks.

One of the pages of the website tells about True Life Church. On that page will be a statement of our beliefs. While I was reviewing that statement, I was moved to prepare a series of sermons on the subject of what we believe.

During this series, we will review the truths of the Bible on particular subjects such as the nature of God, the person of Christ, the role of the Holy Spirit, as well as such subjects as man, sin, salvation, preservation of the saints, end times, and the judgment.

This is a work in progress, so I am not sure how long it will take us to go through a study like this. The goal will be that, by the time we are finished, we have a good general idea of what the Bible teaches about particular doctrines.

This morning we will begin this study with the most likely subject – the Pursuit of God, or our search for truth concerning the person and nature of God.

This week, I had two encounters that represent the typical responses of men when it comes to the subject of God and Christianity.

1. Apathy
2. Ignorance

Earlier this week, I received a phone call from a woman seeking help paying her utility bill. She came to the church to pick up and fill out an application for benevolence.

Before she left, I asked her if she attended a church. Her response was something like, "No, I haven't been able to yet."

This lady and her family – there are seven people living in the household – live within half of a mile of two fairly large churches and not much farther from two other smaller churches. She could not find the time to attend any of these churches, yet when it came to asking for a handout, she did not hesitate to ask.

The family did not have enough money to pay for utilities, although according to her application, they are spending \$250 per month on Comcast cable, phone, and internet.

The family (all adults) seems to be quite concerned about the entertainment opportunities of the world while remaining apathetic towards a relationship with God, their Creator and ultimately their Judge.

Then on Thursday, my computer malfunctioned once again, requiring me to contact technical support. This was the fourth call, so when the agent answered, I felt pretty certain that she was located in Manila, Philippines, as the others had been.

Of course, there is a good bit of dead time in the process of analyzing and repairing. During one of those lulls, I asked Michelle about her relationship with Jesus Christ.

She responded that she is a Christian. Then she asked me if I was a believer? When I answered yes, she asked if I was a Christian or a Catholic.

I was intrigued by her question and, as she seemed willing to share, I took advantage of her curiosity to witness as much as a phone connection and the circumstances of our call would allow.

Michelle admitted that she had a Bible but had never read it. She seemed to be basically ignorant of anything the Bible had to say, so I did the best I could to summarize the creation, the Fall of man, and God's plan of redemption.

She seemed to be genuinely interested in everything I had to say. We did not come to a point of decision during the conversation – at least as far as was verbalized – but she did agree to open her Bible when she got the chance and begin reading the gospel of John.

Will Durant, a well-known historian and philosopher, said that the greatest question of our time is, "Can man live without God?"

Ravi Zacharias wrote a book that bears that question as its title in which he sought to answer two questions:

1. Does God exist?
2. If God exists, what is His character or nature?

One thing we as Christians need to realize is that all that other religions believe is not wrong. All religions contain some element of truth. Most contain excellent teachings and call for a high moral character among their adherents.

However, all religions cannot be correct on all subjects, and when we discover a subject or belief on which other religions and Christianity disagree, we need to stand firmly on the point that only Christianity is true.

There can only be one correct answer to the questions of righteousness. And there can only be one answer to the question concerning the existence of God. Either He exists or He does not.

The beliefs concerning the existence of God form the first great division among men concerning religion. When the existence of God is considered, there are three major belief systems:

1. Atheism

Etienne Borne:

Atheism is the deliberate, definite, dogmatic denial of the existence of God. It is not satisfied with appropriate truth or relative truth, but claims to see the ins and outs of the game quite clearly being the absolute denial of the absolute.

Ravi Zacharias:

Atheism is not merely a passive unbelief in God but an assertive denial of the major claims of all varieties of theism; atheism contradicts belief in God with a positive affirmation of matter as ultimate reality.

Atheism may be...

- practical (characterized by an apathy towards God as with the lady seeking benevolence)

- dogmatic (one who openly declares that they do not believe in any form of god).

2. Agnosticism

The agnostic does not declare that God does not exist – a position that cannot be proven any more than the existence of God – but says that there is not enough empirical evidence to make a determination if God exists or not.

The word “agnostic” means “without knowledge.” There is not enough knowledge to make a decision about the existence of God.

Furthermore, since all truth is relative, then all knowledge is also relative and therefore uncertain. In other words, God is not only unknown, but unknowable.

Typically, the result is the same as that of atheism in that the agnostic refuses to acknowledge the existence of God and thus the lordship of Christ.

3. Theism

This group includes everyone else – in other words, those who acknowledge the presence of a Supreme Being of some sort.

This category can be further subdivided into several groups:

• Dualism

There are two equal forces in the Universe – Good and Evil – vying for control. Only one will eventually win, but the outcome is anything but certain.

According to Henry Theissen, Good and Evil – God and Satan – “are both eternal. God is limited in power and perhaps in knowledge, but not in quality of character.

God is doing the best he can with the recalcitrant world and will ultimately triumph completely over it. Man ought to assist God in this struggle and hasten the complete overthrow of evil.

God is considered as growing and as finite.”

- **Pantheism**

Pantheism typically denies the transcendence as well as the personality of God and teaches that God is immanent in the Universe. In other words, God *is* the material universe.

“God is all; all is God.”

- **Deism**

Deism puts the emphasis on God's transcendence to the neglect of His immanence. In other words, “God is present in creation only by his power, not in his very nature and being.”

God created the universe, then sat back to watch it run down like an old watch that never gets rewound or never has its battery replaced.

- **Polytheism**

Polytheism is the belief in many gods, typically resulting in idolatry.

- **Henotheism**

Henotheism is very similar to polytheism in that the adherent believes there are many gods in the universe, but they have singled out one of those gods as the focus of their worship.

Mormonism is henotheistic. They worship only one god – the god of this world. However, they also believe that the god of this world was once a man who earned the right to be a god and that every man has the potential to become a god.

Since there are an unknown or infinite number of planets in the Universe, then there is an unknown or an infinite number of gods.

- **Monotheism**

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God.

I know you are finally relieved to find a category that fits your beliefs.

There are three major belief systems in the world that are monotheistic: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

When I graduated from high school many long years ago, a woman in our town who had mentored me through my high school years gave me a book which I no longer have for some reason, since I never throw anything away.

It is only now in these later years of my life that I realize what an effect that little book had on my life.

It was entitled *Your God Is Too Small* by J. B. Phillips.

The premise of the book is that, even with those who were raised in the church and in an evangelical setting have a very limited concept of God, both in knowledge and in application.

In the words of J.B. Phillips, many people in the world see God as a “hot house god who could only exist between the pages of the Bible or inside the four walls of a Church.”

In other words, we have made God our own and have defined Him in terms with which we are comfortable.

As a result, the world sees our God as one who exists only in myths and in the apparently secret society of the church fellowship. Certainly ours is not a God who can cope with the affairs of a modern-day world. What does God know about computers and space travel and the everyday struggles of a contemporary society?

It is no wonder, then, that when a tragedy strikes, people ask, “Where was God?” Even members of the Christian community ask that question and doubt whether God really cares or even knows about their lives.

J. B. Phillips

Many men and women today are living, often with inner dissatisfaction, without any faith in God at all. This is not because they are particularly wicked or selfish or, as the old-fashioned would say, “godless,” but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to “account for” life, big enough to “fit in with” the new scientific age, big enough to command their highest admiration and respect, and consequently their willing co-operation.

As a result, there are many conceptions of what God is really like, most of them filled with error with the result that our Christianity is powerless and our testimony ineffective, even in our families and the lives of our children.

First of all, many depend on their consciences to be the voice of God, yet such a practice is fraught with danger and with deception. The conscience can be controlled by the will or ignored by the mind to the point that it is ineffective in directing anyone's life to the perfection that God calls us.

For those who are sensitive in their spirit and prone to yield to guilt at the slightest hint of impropriety, the conscience can be an over exacting tyrant."

To those who are insensitive – who by habit have ignored the compelling spirit of right-living within them, the conscience becomes "a comfortable accommodating 'Voice Within' which would never interfere with a man's pleasure."

Secondly, some understand the person of God based on the concept of father, but the father that they have in mind is not that of the Father of Christ, but the experience of life with their own earthly father.

How many of us had perfect fathers who were always available to be there when we needed them most, who took the assignment of making disciples seriously, who loved us unconditionally? How many were apathetic at best and tyrannical at worst?

When I taught middle school, I remember a demographic of the students in our school that indicated that over 65% of the students lived in single-parent homes – and typically that single parent was a mother.

I read a statistic recently that said that over 60% of the births in America are to unmarried women. So the father's function is only utilitarian and his faithfulness is non-existent because he is either unknown or nowhere to be found.

Thirdly, others see God as the "old man in the sky."

That is not difficult to understand when you think of the way we talk to our children about God.

We teach them that they must respect their elders. We also teach them that they must respect God above everyone and everything else. So God must be the oldest of the elders.

A child soon realizes that the older they get, the more they learn. Since God knows everything, then He must be infinitely old.

We put a lot of emphasis on going to heaven to be with God and often neglect to teach our children that God is everywhere – that He is immanent in the creation.

We may not teach this consciously, but we live it unconsciously since we spend so much of our time trying to solve life's problems instead of spending time with our children praying to God for answers to those problems. So God becomes someone who is far removed and distant from reality.

These and many other concepts of God have crept in unawares into our homes and even our churches. We do not have a clear concept of biblical doctrines because we do not have a clear concept of the God who created us.

If we get it wrong about God, then we will get it wrong about everything else. That is why we will begin our "Rooted" study learning what the Bible has to say about God.

We will do this with lots of scriptures and with limited commentary. I encourage you today to begin praying that God will move in our church and even in our community as we endeavor to understand Him and His ways and purposes.

Resources

Richard L. Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, Copyright © 1997 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. and the authors, <http://bible.org/seriespage/god-spirit>.

R.A. Torrey. *What the Bible Teaches*. Copyright 1898-1933, Fleming H. Revell Company. C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. Harper:San Francisco. 2001.

J. B. Phillips. *Your God Is Too Small*. (A pdf text downloaded from the internet several years ago. There is no known copyright.)

Charles C. Ryrie. *Basic Theology*. Moody Press:Chicago. 1999.

Ravi Zacharias. *Can Man Live Without God*. Word Publishing. 1994.

Henry Clarence Thiessen. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company:Grand Rapids, MI. 2003.

John C. Rankin, "Male and Female as the Image of God: The Grand Design," <http://www.teinet.net/granddesign.html>

Andrew S. Kulikovsky, "The Nature of God," <http://hermeneutics.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/god.pdf>